

### The Bluest Black Eye:

Exploring the Dark Side of Double Consciousness with Pecola Breedlove  
in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Racism against the African American has proven to be a particularly venomous animal, especially when it sinks its teeth into African American children. The theory of double consciousness, found poignantly expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is the idea that the African American must navigate the voyages of life from within a form of “twoness” (2), because he is both man, and black man. *The Souls of Black Folk* was written long after Du Bois first experienced the circumstances that would formulate this theory, circumstances which occurred in his days as a young schoolboy, when he realized he was “different from the others,” and he was “shut out from their world by a vast veil” (2). That “vast veil” of darkness descends upon an African American child at an early age. In *Prejudice and Your Child*, psychologist Kenneth Clark reveals that “racial awareness is present in Negro children as young as three years old” (19), and Clark further reveals:

As children develop an awareness of racial differences and of their racial identity, they also develop an awareness and acceptance of the prevailing social attitudes and values attached to race and skin color . . . the child knows that he must be identified with something that is being rejected—and something that he himself rejects. This pattern introduces, early in the formation of the personality of these children, a fundamental conflict about themselves. (46)

The African American children of *The Bluest Eye*, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer, and poor, pitiful Pecola Breedlove, discover that the color of their skin excludes them from the soft eyes of favor that fall upon little girls who belong to the white world. The penalty for this

discovery is the resulting division of their minds, through the realization that they are both little girls, and *black* little girls. While the MacTeer girls prove themselves capable of responding with a reactive action that captures the poison darts of racism and projects them back outward—thereby protecting a strong sense of identity—Pecola Breedlove demonstrates a passive response that instead absorbs the poison *inward*, which creates instability within her psyche and undermines her sense of identity. It is through this action that Morrison reveals the dark side of the effects of double consciousness on a child, because the consequences brought on by Pecola's dissolving sense of identity are severe—equating to the loss of her sanity.

Before Pecola's demise can be fully examined, it must first be established that double consciousness is alive and well within *The Bluest Eye*, and that it is affecting these African American children. Claudia and Frieda are introduced at nine and ten years old (15), and Pecola is eleven (35). It's hard to say at exactly what age the girls might have become aware of their skin color, but it isn't difficult to see that the effects of double consciousness are already unfolding upon them: Claudia wishes to destroy white baby dolls (20), Pecola cherishes a Shirley Temple cup from which she "took every opportunity to drink milk out of just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (23), and Frieda is willing to give up ice cream to avoid a possible altercation with a little mulatto girl who has informed them that she is cute (76), while they are ugly (73). Claudia even asks the question of little white girls: "What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww,' but not for me?" (22).

One of the most poignant revelations we receive of the extent of the "twoness" existing in these children is the jealousy Claudia experiences while watching Bojangles dance onscreen with Shirley Temple. It emerges from her declaration that "he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels" (19). For Claudia, whose socks apparently did slide down beneath her heels, even articles of clothing are capable of showing a preference to white girls. This idea is surely representative of the much larger awareness that exists within little African American girls: the world is not the same place for them as it is for white girls. Added to this is the insult that an African American man is "enjoying" a dance with a little white girl,

instead of an African American child such as Claudia, who feels that Bojangles should be “*my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me” (19).

The sense of double consciousness is further revealed by the thoughts and feelings of the MacTeer girls toward the little white girl who lives next door to them:

Rosemary Villanucci . . . sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can’t come in. We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down. We will say no. We don’t know what we should feel or do if she does, but whenever she asks us, we know that she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept. (9)

First, consider the name Morrison has attributed to this troublesome little white girl:

“Rosemary,” which sounds like an aptly prim and proper name from the white world, and “Villanucci,” which sounds and even looks like “villain you see.” This establishes Rosemary, and the white world in which she lives and which she represents, as the villain, which naturally stages the opposite and counterpart black world, along with the girls who are trapped in it, as the victims. Rosemary is fortunate enough to ride in a nice car while Claudia and Frieda are walking, and she is quick to inform them that they “can’t come in” to that bread and butter world of hers. What Rosemary owns has little to do with the car in which she rides. She has no more capability to own a vehicle than Claudia or Frieda; neither can the possession of the bread and butter she’s eating be attributed to Rosemary’s ability to acquire it. This leaves the one thing this child *is* capable of owning—and feeling pride and arrogance for the possession of—her skin color. Her “chewing mouth” is curling, presumably into a smile or a smirk, as she regards the unfortunate little black girls, and she chews not only on that bread and butter, but upon her superiority over them.

The MacTeer girl’s response to Rosemary is striking, but not surprising. It is quite

reactive, as they wish to “poke the arrogance” from her eyes and destroy that “pride of ownership” she is lucky enough to experience. They also make plans to “beat her up” when she emerges from the car and “make red marks on her white skin.” There are two especially thought-provoking aspects of this reaction. First, red is the color most often associated with anger and even rage, and red marks appearing on the skin of any person, regardless of skin color, are representative of injury to them. The MacTeer girls wish to project their red marks of fury onto Rosemary’s white skin, and perhaps by extension the white skin of the white world.

This suggestion stems from the second interesting aspect of their response; when Rosemary offers to “pull her pants down” while they beat her up, it is an offer which Claudia and Frieda *refuse*. Having your pants pulled down results in extreme humiliation. Rosemary’s offer to pull her pants down—and subsequently subject herself to that kind of disgrace at the hands of the MacTeer girls—can be equated with the humiliation she feels upon being yanked out of her white world and dragged into the black world—because of her association with these black little girls. They must reject the offer of Rosemary to condescend into this level of humiliation, or else admit that their world is one which would require such an action on the part of a white girl. Claudia and Frieda instinctively know that their “pride must be asserted by refusing to accept” (9) this.

The reactive nature existing within the MacTeer girls makes them representative of the statement Du Bois makes in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he defines the African American as consisting of “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (2). Despite the fact that Claudia and Frieda must live and breathe double consciousness, their fiery and prideful response to it proves that they possess this “dogged strength” needed to keep them “from being torn asunder,” and therefore their sense of identity is never compromised. Yet the same cannot be said for every African American child, and it certainly cannot be said for Pecola Breedlove. In regards to the disappointing reality that unfolds at the hands of racism, Clark reveals that African American children “are forced at an early age to develop ways of coping with these fundamental conflicts. Not every child reacts with the

same patterns of self-protection” (64).

Unlike the MacTeer girls, Pecola’s pattern of self-protection is not reactive projection, it is passive acceptance. When she is encircled by a group of bullies on the school playground, she is unable to defend herself and must be rescued by Claudia and Frieda (66). When Junior falsely accuses her of killing his mother’s cat (91), Pecola doesn’t contradict him, not even when his mother calls her a “nasty little black bitch” (92). When she experiences her first period, she is panic-stricken and merely makes a “whinnying” sound (27), needing Frieda to show her what to do (30).

The difference between Pecola and the MacTeer girls is highlighted by their contrasting response to the cruel treatment they experience at the hands of mulatto classmate, Maureen Peal, when she declares the three of them to be “[b]lack and ugly black e mos” (73). The MacTeer girls are quick to recover from this attack and project back a colorful insult of their own, calling Maureen “six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie” (73). Pecola, on the other hand, responds quite differently. As Claudia describes it:

Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes. (73-74)

Despite the fact that the MacTeer girls and Pecola are insulted equally by Maureen Peal, Pecola “stood a little apart” from the other two. The physical distance separating them is representative of the distance that also exists between their mental aptitudes. The MacTeer girls project their disgruntled feelings outward in response to Maureen’s callous outburst, but Pecola doesn’t join in their defense. Instead, she “fold[s] into herself,” retreating inward with pain, and her “pleated wing” is foreshadowing of her dissolving identity. Naturally, this action antagonizes Claudia, who is thicker-skinned and wishes to open Pecola up to “crisp her edges,” so Pecola also would have thick enough skin to survive in their world.

While what is happening to Pecola is unfortunate, it is not an unknown phenomenon. Clark states:

As minority-group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned and observe that they are usually segregated and isolated from the more privileged members of their society, they react with deep feelings of inferiority and with a sense of personal humiliation. Many of them become confused about their own personal worth. (63)

This is exactly what is happening to Pecola Breedlove; her self-worth is tied up in the way she sees the world, or rather, the way the world sees her, and her passive nature allows the thorn-riddled paths of double consciousness to lead her straight into the dark land of self-depreciation. Morrison illustrates this happening in Pecola through the pivotal scene at the candy store, when “fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper” (48), Mr Yacobowski, treats Pecola with such contempt that he even tries to keep from touching her when he takes her money for penny candy (49). Pecola’s response:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiously ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended . . . Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (48-49)

The most poignant two lines here are: “All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread.” This is the *embodiment* of double consciousness. In her natural state, Pecola Breedlove is just like any other little girl, white or black. Her heart and mind are full of development and hopeful expectation and the desire to move forward in the world. The process by which she realizes the limitations she faces as an African American child, in the “total absence of human recognition” in the face of this white man, is revealed here in Pecola’s own thoughts by Morrison’s use of the word “so” to connect one idea to the next: It is “lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness.” *Pecola’s* blackness. Pecola’s *blackness*. Her skin color is distasteful, and therefore she as a

person must be distasteful. Morrison reveals, again through Pecola's own thoughts, what happens when Pecola has made this unjust realization:

Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb . . . Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski's eyes, his phlegmy voice. The anger will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly quenched, it sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes. What to do before the tears come. She remembers the Mary Janes. (50)

The anger is there, and it gives the reader hope—hope that Pecola has a chance to find her way through, to share in that “dogged strength” Claudia and Frieda possess that allows them, like Pecola in this moment, to have “a sense of being” and “reality and presence.” But Pecola's anger is merely a “hot-mouthed puppy,” when it needs to be a snaggle-toothed bulldog. Shame fights it off too easily. Instead of harnessing that righteous anger and projecting it outward, or even inward into an avenue of personal strength, Pecola takes a wrong turn somewhere within the corridors of her mind: “What to do before the tears come. *She remembers the Mary Janes*” (50, italics mine).

Here is little Mary Jane, with her “smiling white face” on the candy wrapper and her “[b]lond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at [Pecola] out of a world of clean comfort” (50). That “world of clean comfort” is clearly the white world, and it isn't any wonder that Pecola wishes to be a part of it. Clark states: “If society says it is better to be white, not only white people but Negroes come to believe it. And a child may try to escape the trap of inferiority by denying the fact of his own race” (37). Pecola loses all sense of personal value as an individual, she relinquishes even her inner most thoughts which are neither white nor black, and instead wishes to “eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. *Be Mary Jane*” (50, italics mine).

Pecola's desire for blue eyes is her undoing. Clark warns that “[c]hildren cannot be encouraged to substitute personal wishes for social reality without severe risk to the stability

of their personalities” (6). There is no room in Pecola’s reality for blue eyes, or the pretty white face she longs for while eating the Mary Janes (50), or the fond gazes she sends in the direction of Shirley Temple (19). Reality for Pecola Breedlove is found only within her black world, through which she travels with dark skin and through which she sees with dark eyes, and where she finds people like the white man behind the candy counter who “does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (48). Disillusioned Pecola prays “fervently” (46) for blue eyes because she believes that “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (46). This is the dark side of double consciousness, and it takes Pecola by the hand and draws her gently into madness, complete with “bird-like gestures” (205) and imaginary friends (193-204).

It must be acknowledged that Pecola’s loss of sanity cannot be attributed to double consciousness alone. Her ruin is most certainly also related to the deplorable treatment she experiences in her home life, particularly at the hands of her father who rapes her not once, but twice (201). From a horror such as this, Pecola doesn’t even have a comforting mother to turn to, because Mrs. Breedlove prefers the rich little white girl she cares for to Pecola (127). Yet even these appalling aspects of Pecola’s life are intricately related to double consciousness, because of Pecola’s belief that if she had blue eyes, everything would be different:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights . . . If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. (46)

When Pecola wishes to disappear from a world that is overwhelmingly full of “bad things” for her, she imagines that she is able to make every part of her body become invisible—except her eyes (45). Her eyes hold those “pictures” and the “sights,” which are images that have become a part of her memory and therefore cannot be removed. Since she cannot remove them, and since she lacks the mental aptitude to view herself in the world as anything other than ugly (45), she in turn equates all negative circumstances with the color of her eyes. Even in the midst of psychosis, such life altering events like the rapes and the



subsequent dire end to a pregnancy (204) seem to be afterthoughts—the driving force is instead generated by double consciousness—it is Pecola’s paralyzing fear that someone out there may have bluer eyes than the ones she falsely comes to believe (193) she has:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.

*That’s just too bad, isn’t it?*

Please help me look.

*No.*

But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough?

*Blue enough for what?*

Blue enough for . . . I don’t know. (203)

Even from within the internal, imaginary world she’s dissolved into, Pecola still can’t answer this question. She doesn’t know what waits for her on the other side of this crippling desire for blue eyes, because there is no “blue enough.” Pecola’s blue eyes don’t exist—they *can’t* exist—therefore *Pecola* ceases to exist, and therein lies the seriousness of the problem. It is the dark side of double consciousness, and it arises from the fact that a little African American girl cannot ever become white. She can’t even accomplish this in her thought life, without losing that which is most precious to her soundness of mind: her identity.

In the forward to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison reveals the focus of the novel to be on “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root in its most delicate member of society, a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (11). What happens to Pecola Breedlove at the hands of racism-induced double consciousness is indeed a result of her delicate nature both as a female and a child, but it happens because she allows this “demonization of an entire race” to *take root* within her. Her passive nature is equally at fault.

Double consciousness is assuredly at work at various levels within the psyches of *all* black children, when they find themselves thrown in and forced to swim through the ocean world of whiteness, and where their dark skin stands out like a black ship on a white horizon. While the MacTeer girls are fortunate enough to have an arsenal of reactive pride to

keep them safely afloat while they wade through the riptides of the white world, Pecola is a child who proves unable to keep her head above water, *white* water, and it is through Pecola that Morrison is able to reveal that the dark side of double consciousness is capable of inflicting devastating results on a child.

### Works Cited

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